

excerpts from
'Going Home'

by Thich Nhat Hanh



"When we practice looking deeply, we realize that our home is everywhere."

"Meditation means to look deeply, to touch deeply so we can realize we are already home."

"Mindful breathing brings you home."

"Live your daily life in a way that you never lose yourself."

"If we spend time quarreling with each other as to whether God is a person or a non-person, we waste our time."



In Asia, the Lunar New Year is considered a time for people to go back to their home, their roots. If you are Chinese or Vietnamese, you go back to your family home that day. This is an opportunity for people to see each other again after some time of being apart from each other. During the time they are together, they practice connecting with each other and with their ancestors. To practice going home, to practice getting in touch with our ancestors, is what everyone wants to do on New Year's Day.

Our True Home

When you practice the bell of mindfulness, you breathe in, and you listen deeply to the sound of the bell, and you say, "Listen, listen." Then you breathe out and you say, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Our true home is something we all want to go back to. Some of us feel we don't have a home.

What is the meaning of "true home"? In the last Dharma talk, we talked about a wave. Does a wave have a home? When a wave looks deeply into herself, she will realize the presence of all the other waves. When we are mindful, fully living each moment of our daily lives, we may realize that everyone and everything around us is our home.

Isn't it true that the air we breathe is our home, that the blue sky, the rivers, the mountains, the people around us, the trees, and the animals are our home? A wave looking deeply into herself will see that she is made up of all the other waves and will no longer feel she is cut off from everything around her. She will be able to recognize that the other waves are also her home. When you practice walking meditation, walk in such a way that you recognize your home, in the here and the now. See the trees as your home, the air as your home, the blue sky as your home, and the earth that you tread as your home. This can only be done in the here and the now.

Sometimes we have a feeling of alienation. We feel lonely and as if we are cut off from everything. We have been a wanderer and have tried hard but have never been able to reach our true home. However, we all have a home, and this is our practice, the practice of going home.

It's funny. In my country, the husband refers to his wife as "my home." The wife refers to her husband as "my home." Talking with another person he might say, "My home said that" or "My home is not here at the moment." There must be some feeling behind this.

When we say, "Home sweet home," where is it? When we practice looking deeply, we realize that our home is everywhere. We have to be able to see that the trees are our home and the blue sky is our home. It looks like a difficult practice, but it's really easy. You only need to stop being a wanderer in order to be at home. "Listen, listen. This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." The voice of the Buddha, the sound of the bell, the sunshine, everything is calling us back to our true home. Once you are back in your true home, you'll feel the peace

and the joy you deserve.

If you are a Christian, you feel that Jesus Christ is your home. It's very comfortable to think of Jesus as your home. If you are a Buddhist, then it's very nice to think of the Buddha as your home. Your home is available in the here and the now. Christ is there, the Buddha is there. The practice is how to touch them, how to touch your home. You call Christ "the Living Christ," so you cannot believe that Christ is only someone who lived in the past, and is no longer there. He is ever-present. Your practice is how to touch him; he is your home. If you are a Buddhist, you practice very much in the same way. You invoke the name of the Buddha as one of the ways to touch the Buddha, because you know that he is your home. The living Christ, the living Buddha is your home.

But the living Christ is not only a notion, or an idea. He must be a reality. This is true for the living Buddha, too. How can you recognize the presence of the living Christ or the living Buddha? This is your practice. Maybe when you hear the sound of the bell, you are able to recognize him, to touch your true home. Maybe because you know how to walk mindfully, with concentration, you recognize your home.

What is the home of a wave? The home of the wave is all the other waves, and the home of the wave is water. If the wave is capable of touching himself and the other waves very deeply, he will realize that he is made of water. Being aware that he is water, he transcends all discrimination, sorrows, and fears. Your home is available in the here and the now. Your home is Jesus or God. Your home is Buddha, or Buddhahood.

A Person? Or More than a Person

Last week we spoke of nirvana as the reality of no birth and no death.

Nirvana is our true substance just as water is the true substance of the wave. We practice to realize that nirvana is our substance. Once we realize this, we transcend the fear of birth and death, of being and non-being. God is an equivalent expression. God is the foundation of being, or as many theologians, like Paul Tillich, say, "God is the ground of being."

Last week we said that the notion of being and non-being cannot be applied to God or to nirvana. The notion of beginning and end cannot be applied to the absolute either. That is why both the notion of person and of non-person cannot be applied to God nor can it be applied to nirvana. So if we spend time quarreling with each other as to whether God is a person or a non-person, we waste our time. That is discouraged in the Buddhist practice and that is why Paul Tillich was so skillful when he said, "God is not a person, but not less than a person." It was a wonderful way to advise people not to spend too much time speculating.

We are people, but we are also more than just people. Are you only a person? Or at the same time are you also a tree and a rock? You only need to look deeply to discover that you are a person and at the same time you are a rock and a tree. In the Buddhist circle, people believe that in former lives they were human beings, animals, plants, and minerals. This is scientifically true. If we look deeply into the evolution of our species, we see that in former times we have been a rock, a tree, and an animal. Humans are very young creatures. We have evolved over many years to become what we are today. It is scientifically proven that we have been a rock, a cloud, a tree, a rabbit, a deer, a rose, and a single-cell being.

If you continue to look deeply, you will see that in the present moment, you continue to be a rose, a rabbit, a tree, and a rock. This is the truth of interbeing. You are made of non-you elements. You can touch the cloud within you. You can touch the sunshine within you. You can touch the trees and the earth within you. You know that if these elements were not in you, you could not be here at this very moment. Not only in former lives were you a tree, but sitting here, right now, you are a tree. That is why I say that the trees are your home. Recognize your home, your home sweet home.

Cultivating Our Home, Cultivating the Holy

In East Asia, we speak of the human body as a mini-cosmos. The cosmos is our home, and we can touch it by being aware of our body. Meditation is to be still: to sit still, to stand still, and to walk with stillness. Meditation means to look deeply, to touch deeply so we can realize we are already home. Our home is available right here and now.

Jesus Christ practiced meditation. When John baptized Jesus, he made it possible for the Holy Spirit to be born, or manifested, in Jesus the human being. Then Jesus went to the mountain to spend forty days in retreat. He practiced meditation and strengthened that Spirit in order to bring about a total transformation. Although it's not recorded in what position he practiced, I am sure he did sitting and walking meditation, and that he practiced looking deeply, touching deeply, and nourishing the energy of the Holy Spirit in him. Maybe he sat under a Bodhi tree like the Buddha.

Jesus had the power to bring joy, happiness, and healing to others because the energy of the Holy Spirit was full inside him. We have the seed of the Holy Spirit in us. In the Buddhist circle we speak of Buddhahood. We speak of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us be still; to be present to look deeply and touch deeply so that we begin to understand and realize that we are home.

The image of Jesus that is presented to us is usually of Jesus on the cross. This is a very painful image for me. It does not convey joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus. I hope that our Christian friends will also portray

Jesus in other ways, like sitting in the lotus position or doing walking meditation. Doing so will allow us to feel peace and joy penetrating into our hearts when we contemplate Jesus. This is my suggestion.

Finding Refuge in the Island of Self

In the Buddhist tradition, we practice taking refuge instead of receiving baptism. With a teacher and Sangha, or spiritual community, surrounding you, you join your palms, and say, "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha." That also is the practice of going home. Your home is the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and they are all available in the present moment. You don't have to go to India to practice the Three Refuges. You can be right here to practice taking refuge. Your practice will determine if the feeling of being at home in yourself is deep or not.

When the Buddha was eighty years old and was about to die, he told his disciples they should take refuge in the island of self (attadipa). Because if they go back to themselves and look deeply, they will touch the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha in themselves. This still remains a very important practice for all of us. Every time you feel lost, alienated, cut off from life, or from the world, every time you feel despair, anger, or instability, you have to know how to practice going home. Mindful breathing is the vehicle that you use to go back to your true home where you meet the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Mindful breathing brings you home--it generates the energy of mindfulness in you. Mindfulness is the substance of a Buddha.

The Sangha, the community, is a wonderful home. Every time you go back to the Sangha, you feel that you can breathe easier, you can walk more mindfully, and you can more fully enjoy the blue sky, the white clouds, and the cypress tree in your yard. Why? Because the Sangha members practice going home all day, through walking, breathing, cooking, and doing their daily activities mindfully.

It's strange. You have been to Plum Village and received instructions on how to breathe, walk, smile, and take refuge; you took these back to your home and practiced. Yet whenever you return to Plum Village, you find that with the Sangha you can practice better than when you were home alone. There are things that you don't do easily when you are alone. But surrounded by members of the Sangha, suddenly these things become easy. You don't need to make much effort to do them, and you enjoy doing them a lot. If you had an experience like this, try to build a Sangha where you live.

A Sangha is our refuge. Taking refuge in the Sangha is not a matter of faith, or belief; it is a matter of practice. Talk to your child, your companion, and your friends about the necessity of having a Sangha. If you have a Sangha, you are safe. You can nourish your home and protect yourself. You can enlarge your home all the time to include the clouds, the trees, and the walking meditation path. As you have learned, everything belongs to our home, everything belongs to our Sangha.

You may think that if a person does not believe in the practice, he or she cannot be part of your Sangha. But if he or she is surrounded by three, four, or five people who practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful sitting, and smiling, one day that person may realize that she is more than herself. Even if you don't talk to him or her about your practice, she will realize that there is something in you that keeps you fresh, calm, and happy. You have the Sangha, the Dharma, and the Buddha in you. After that you'll be able to invite him or her into your Sangha. Taking refuge in the Sangha is very important. Not a day goes by when I do not practice taking refuge several times.

Darling, You Are My Home

I practice going home by walking, sitting, and doing things in mindfulness so I do not lose myself. Tinh Thuy, a permanent resident at Plum Village, wrote a song several years ago entitled "I Am Always with Me." The first lines are: "I have been living in myself for a long time. I have never lost myself. I have always been with myself. I have never lost myself."

This is a very important practice. Live your daily life in a way that you never lose yourself. When you are carried away with your worries, fears, cravings, anger, and desire, you runaway from yourself and you lose yourself. The practice is always to go back to oneself. You have a wonderful vehicle. And you don't have to buy any gasoline. Mindful breathing and mindful walking are wonderful ways to go back to oneself.

When I meet myself, I see a lot of space. When you are there with yourself, taking care of yourself, there is space in you, vast enough for the white clouds to travel in.

Tinh Thuy's song continues: "I still have my future. I still have my past. That is why I feel light and happy today." Where is your future? Where is your past? You can discover your future, and your past, just by going back to yourself. Of course your ancestors are there within you. When you go back to yourself, you touch your ancestors. Your grandpa and grandma, your father and mother are alive in you. Your ancestors have never died. They are still in you. You only need to practice mindful breathing to touch them and smile at them.

In former lives you were a tree, a rock, a cloud, a rabbit, a deer. All these things are still in you and you can touch them. They belong to your home. Go back and touch these elements and you will see that your Dharma body is huge and your home is vast. Your brothers and sisters, your children and their children, your students and their students are there. They are not just around you; they are within you.

Imagine a lemon tree in springtime. There are a lot of beautiful white lemon blossoms. You don't see any lemons on the tree, yet you know that the lemons are already there. Because the lemon blossoms are there, the lemons are there. So even if you are still young, you can touch your children and your grandchildren within you. Your children and your grandchildren also constitute your home.

You have to be able to look at the cypress tree, breathing in, breathing out, smiling, and tell the cypress, "Darling, you are my home." Touch deeply the earth that you tread: "Darling, you are my home." The Earth can be a mother, she can be a sister. Why do you have to run to find your home? Your home is here, your home is now. Recognize it. Everything, everyone is part of your true home. You have a lot of space. You are not isolated. You are us and you can embrace us as your home. "Us" means a cypress tree, a deer, a rabbit, and so on.

Everyone of us needs a home. The world needs a home. There are so many young people who are homeless. They may have a building to live in, but they are homeless in their hearts. That is why the most important practice of our time is to give each person a home. Be a home for them. Each of us has to serve as the home for others. When we look at something or someone, be it a person, a tree, or anything, look at it in such a way that we touch them as part of our home. "Here is the Pure Land, the Pure Land is here." That is the beginning of a song we like to sing in Plum Village. The Pure Land is our true home.

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